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**MONDAY**  
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ROBERT EPPERLY at 20



ROBERT EPPERLY, 84

# A VET'S TALES

## Worthington lunch, like many events this week, shines light on area veterans

By LAURA RODLEY  
Gazette Contributing Writer

**WORTHINGTON** — During his distinguished career as a pilot in the U.S. Navy, Robert Epperly of Worthington played a pivotal role in flying scientists and supplies to Antarctica in the 1950s in an undertaking called Operation Deep Freeze.

In fact, a mountain in the Antarctic is named after Epperly, 84, who will join about 20 other Worthington veterans in marking Veterans Day today with a Council on Aging luncheon at the Town Hall on Huntington Road.

His memories of his time in the Navy no doubt were rekindled this weekend when he reconnected with others involved in Operation Deep Freeze at a reunion in San Antonio.

Today's lunch will be hosted by his wife, Sandra Epperly, chairwoman of COA, who said the veterans expected at the invitation-only luncheon range in age from 24 to 84. She said the purpose of the event is to honor the town's veterans, and thank them for their service.

"They are our guests for lunch. They usually don't want to talk and we give them a red boutonniere and

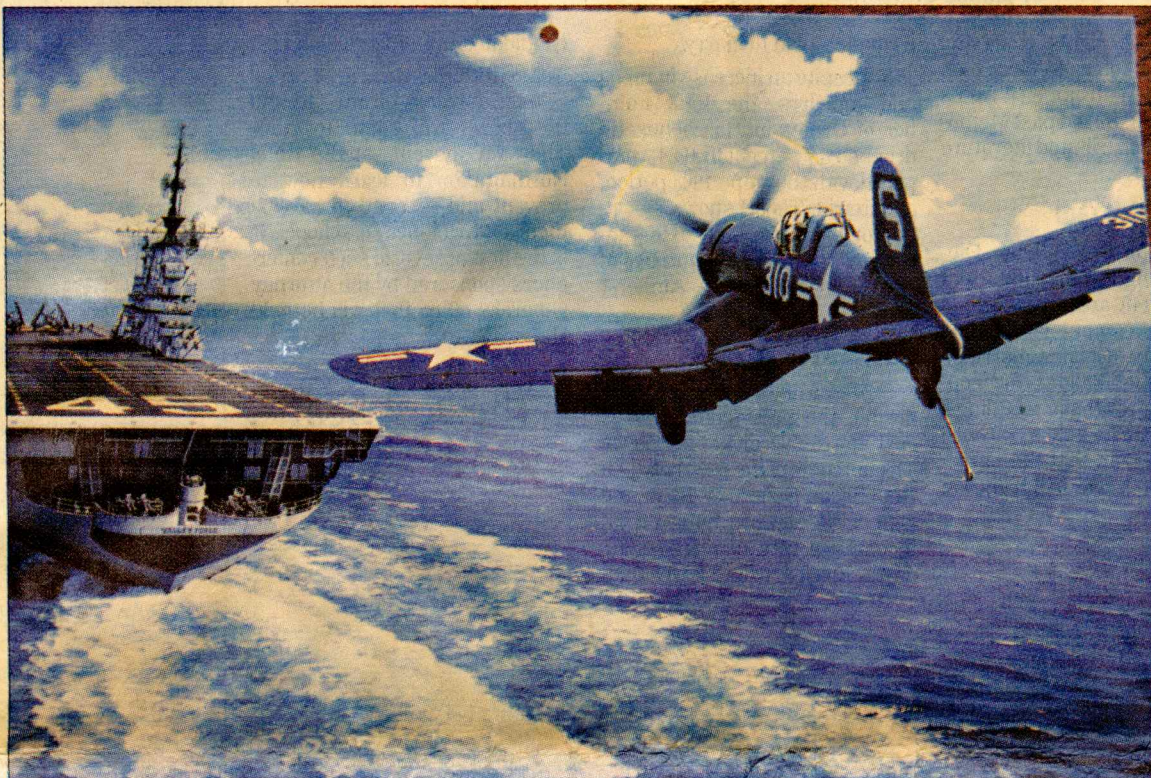


PHOTO COURTESY ROBERT EPPERLY

This photograph, which Robert Epperly keeps in a scrapbook with mementos from his years in the service, shows an F4U Corsair fighter aircraft flying toward a Navy aircraft carrier. The Corsair is a machine Epperly always wanted to fly, and one of the reasons he joined the Navy, he said, though he never got a chance to fly it.

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## Pilot, 84, is senior veteran at Worthington lunch

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we have them stand, if they can, and say what branch of service they were in," she said.

A representative from the Holyoke Soldiers' Home, Larry White, will be the featured speaker, and children from the R.H. Conwell Community Education Center will be on hand, which Epperly feels is as good for the children as it is for the veterans who enjoy their company.

"A lot of the kids don't know who a veteran is," she said.

Sandra Epperly said she admires her husband's commitment to service.

Robert Epperly, who has been in love with airplanes all his life, turned that passion into a 20-year career as a U.S. Navy pilot. All told, Epperly flew for a total of 57 years, during which he piloted two of his own airplanes, a Cessna 182 and Mooney 201. He gave up flying a few years back, but he still considers it his passion and recalls his service as a Navy pilot vividly.

About 6 feet 2 inches tall with gray hair, Epperly still stands like a pilot, relaxed, with his hands in his pockets, as though ready to take off at any time.

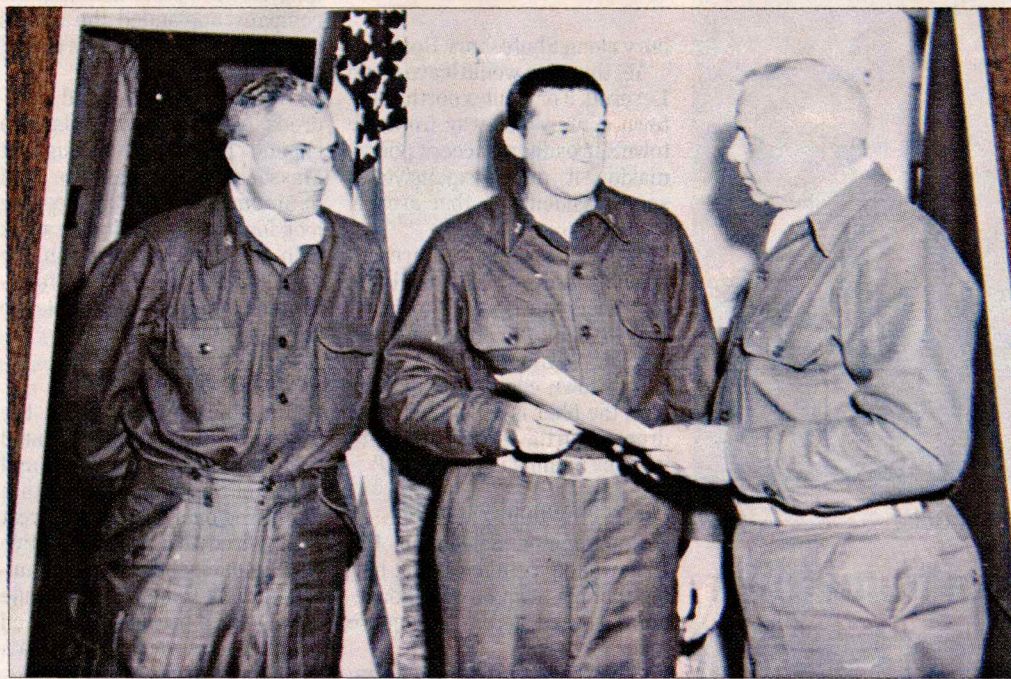
Born in Oklahoma in 1926, his love of airplanes grew from reading the comic strip "The Adventures of Smilin' Jack," he recalled.

"He went to the Antarctic, too, in the '30s. I always enjoyed that cartoon," said Epperly, talking recently from his Huntington Road home. He joined the Navy as a lieutenant in 1943 and retired as a commander in 1964.

While serving in the Korean War in the 1950s, though he didn't fly combat missions, his airplane was attacked by enemy soldiers throwing hand grenades.

As commander of a squadron flying airplanes in Antarctica from 1956 to 1957, he battled temperatures that dropped to 50 to 60 degrees below freezing. "I did get frostbite, had frozen feet at one time," he said.

As part of Operation Deep Freeze, which took place from 1957 to 1959, Epperly flew supplies to scientists doing research on Antarctica's vast



LAURA RODLEY  
Capt. Robert Slagle of the Air Development Squadron, V8-6, left, and Adm. George Dufek present a commendation from the Secretary of the Navy to Robert Epperly, center, for safely guiding four U.S. Air Force planes back to a base and onto the ground during white-out conditions, in this photograph from Epperly's collection.

frozen terrain and uncharted territory and helped set up bases for their operations. Fittingly, he named the plane he flew on those missions "Negatus Perspirus," which, he said, translates as "No Sweat."

Other countries, including the Soviet Union, were also stationed in Antarctica during that time, but only the United States had air stations based there, according to Epperly. Tractor trains — sleds pulled by large Caterpillar tractors — were used on 1,200-mile treks, in which scientists and other crew members set off dynamite to measure the depth of the snow and took soil, ice and snow samples during trips that lasted three to four months.

"The Navy was there to support their scientific operations. They actually built the McMurdo station and Little America in 1956," as well as other bases, said Epperly, whose term in Antarctica began on Oct. 3, 1956, when the region's summer starts and the midnight sun begins.

The McMurdo base is still there, he added.

"My job was to help keep them supplied, bring their mail,

fuel, supplies, everything," Epperly said.

A 1967 issue of National Geographic includes a picture of 15,103-foot-tall Mount Epperly, the mountain named after him in Antarctica's Ellsworth range. "I suspect it was probably one of the leading scientists on the tractor trains that recommended me on the National Board of Names," Epperly said.

He conducted survey flights and used a gravimeter while airborne that measured gravity, collecting further data to support the scientists in their work. Some flights lasted 14 hours.

Planes were outfitted with skis to land in the snow when they delivered supplies.

When they weren't flying, they lived in Quonset hut structures that were linked by a tunnel.

"In a year or two of snow blowing, it was completely underground," Epperly said.

The magnetic compass would

not work in Antarctica because the magnetic South Pole was so close — 800 miles away — making the readings erratic. Instead, for directions, they used a system that involved navigating with a grid, from point to point.

"You had to know what your grid reading was," Epperly said, as they frequently flew into white-out conditions. They also relied on celestial navigation, based on the sunrise and position of the stars, each other — and a lot of luck, he said.

William Burkart was Epperly's radio man, someone Epperly was pleased to see in San Antonio. Epperly said sometimes he had to land the plane when there was zero visibility, so he had to rely completely on Burkart's readings. "It takes a lot of trust," he said.

During that time, his efforts included talking on the radio while on the ground to the pilots of four U.S. Air Force planes that

had become lost due to zero visibility and guiding them back to a base and safe landings. His help earned him commendations from the Secretary of the Navy.

As a rule, they didn't carry passengers, because it was too cold and windy, he said. There were exceptions. He flew his copilot, Ronald Stone, to a hospital in New Zealand when, he said, "they were a thousand miles from nowhere" and Stone was suffering from kidney stones.

He also transported photographer Emil Schultness, who released a photography book "Antarctica" in 1960. In it are some shots of Epperly taking off.

There were some scary moments, too, including one time when he was waiting outside the plane while scientists collected their samples and the gasoline heater that was positioned under the plane to keep the engines warm caught fire.

Epperly scrambled to get the plane going and away from the heater, but while trying to get the auxiliary engine started the driveshaft broke. He managed to start the engine on battery power alone, and then get both engines started, and eventually transport the scientists back to McMurdo.

In 1959, with the ice runway covered with spilled oil and



LAURA RODLEY

Above, some of the medals Robert Epperly earned while in the Navy, as well as the eagle he wore on his hat. The three shoulder stripes indicate his rank as commander, a post he held when he retired in 1964.

breaking up, he and his crew were forced to leave earlier than scheduled. Sixty miles into the flight, he said, the plane's exterior exhaust stacks broke loose, but with the base's runway now unusable, there was no place left to land in Antarctica. With no other choice, they cut power on the left engine and still managed to land in New Zealand — 14 hours later.

With those stories now in the past, Epperly's passion for the craft has never diminished as he recounts a career that never felt like work.

"I'd rather fly than have to go to work," he said.

Laura Rodley can be reached at [lrodley@gazettenet.com](mailto:lrodley@gazettenet.com).



LAURA RODLEY

Robert Epperly is seen aboard the Negatus Perspirus, the R48-8 airplane he flew during Operation Deep Freeze in Antarctica. The plane's name translates, as closely as he could manage in Latin, to "No Sweat."

Folk Tales  
& Fables

Sparrow and Woodpecker

Japan